

The Family Name *Pfäller*

The meaning of a family name is often to be sought in the locality of its origin. The source word for this family name is the German word *Pfahl*, m., "pale, post," pl. *Pfähle*, "Palisades"; also a place-name.

*Der Pfahl* is a place-name for the ruins of the Roman fortifications in the Jura mountains of Middle Franconia (Bavaria). At first these structures were of rammed-in strong posts or stakes (*Pfähle*) and barriers of felled trees; later they were improved into large earthen, and finally into a mighty stone wall. The Romans gave this wall the name *Limes* (Latin for boundary = extent of Roman authority). With the gradual break-down of the empire in the third century, these walls were abandoned, overrun, and finally in ruins.<sup>1</sup>

The popular designation, *Der Pfahl*, for the remnants of these fortifications in Franconia followed the old tradition of the pales-stakes. When last names came into use, those people living in the vicinity of these walls were labeled Pfäller.<sup>2</sup> A German writer made the observation, "in the region of the Pfahl (in the Jura) the family name *Pfähler* or *Pfäller* is very common."<sup>3</sup>

Following the old heraldic rule, the original Pfäller coat of arms (1419) is a so-called "speaking" coat of arms, meaning that the figure in the shield is related to the name. The charge or symbol is a solid cone with rings near the top. It is best identified as a tool for setting posts — auger (*Pfahl-Loch-Bohrer*). Hence, its description would be, *in a blue field a golden soil drill*. The remarkable thing is that even though the "pfahl" lost its meaning in the migration of families, the changes in the coat-of-arms are not drastic — soil drill, cross on shovel, cross over heart. The family name, too, has changed little — Pfäller, Pfaler, Pfähler, Phaler.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Der Grosse Herder* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1931), s. v. *Limes*, *Pfahl*, *Teufelsmauer*.

<sup>2</sup> Heintze-Cascorbi, *Die Deutschen Familiennamen*, Halle/S.-Berlin, 1933, p. 381: "Pfahlert, Pfähler wohnen am (Grenz)pfahl. Auch Pfäller."

This same work, on p. 188, shows that the family name *Faller* has an entirely different origin: "Faller — der aus Fall — bei Triberg." Other waterfalls also could have given rise to this family designation.

Evidently some families in the U.S.A. have dropped the "P", since the Cincinnati Telephone Directory (1965) under names Pfäller and Faller makes cross-references.

<sup>3</sup> F. J. Bronner, *Bayerisch Land und Volk in Wort u. Bild* (München, 1910), p. 474.

<sup>4</sup> Arno von Pfaler, "Heraldic study of the coat-of-arms and signets used by Pfalers," *Eripainos Genos* (Helsinki, 1957), pp. 40–50. A reprint and English summary supplied to the writer. Cf. also, Pfäller-Grad Families — mimeographed copy by writer — 1957.

The Rev. Benedict Pfäller, O.S.B.

Assumption Abbey  
Richardton, North Dakota